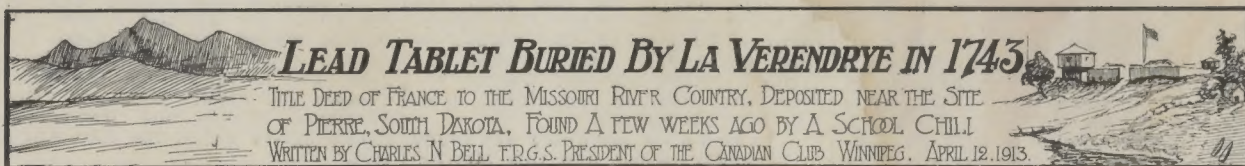


# The Story of the Lead Plate

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(From the Winnipeg Free Press, Saturday, April 12, 1913.)

Quite recently a most valuable historical record, in the form of an inscribed plate of lead, was discovered after having been planted in the earth for one hundred and seventy years. This record was deposited in the bank of the Missouri river in the year 1743 by a son of La Verendrye, the great French-Canadian explorer and discoverer of what is now Western Canada, and the adjoining territory included in the United States. Reproductions of photographs of the actual plate accompany this article. There is a very interesting historical story connected with the discovery of the country west of the Upper Missouri river by Chevalier de la Verendrye and the depositing by him of the metal plate in a bluff overlooking the Missouri river on March 30, 1743, as tangible evidence that he had taken possession of the country for France. The manner of the recovery of this plate after its long deposit in the earth is also interesting.

On February 13 last, the writer, as president of the Winnipeg Canadian club, gave as the subject of his inaugural address "The Discovery of the Country West of Lake Superior and of the Upper Missouri by La Verendrye," and incidentally stated as follows.

"In the spring of 1742 La Verendrye's two sons, with two men, adventured from Fort la Reine to the Missouri river, and beyond till they arrived at the Rocky Mountains which they reached on Jan. 1, 1743, and returning, arrived back at Fort la Reine in July, 1743. This expedition covered a vast territory hitherto not traversed by

white men, and it was not till fully sixty years later that the Americans, Lewis and Clark, backed by unlimited means and supplies, went over the same ground and achieved renown therefor, and earned for themselves a prominent place in the history of the United States. Compare this with the unrivalled successful efforts of the young sons of La Verendrye, whose names are scarcely even known to the average Canadian credited with being ordinarily well-informed."

About three weeks after this address was given, the writer received private information that a metal plate, engraved with the fleur-de-lys of France and an inscription by La Verendrye had just been found by a young girl when playing in the school ground at Fort Pierre, which is situated on the west bank of the Missouri river, where the Bad river joins that stream, and opposite to the city of Pierre, the capital of the state of South Dakota. Immediately people in Pierre were communicated with and finally in correspondence with Mr. Doane Robinson, secretary and superintendent of the department of history of the state of South Dakota, that gentleman stated that the Verendrye metal plate (which is now officially in possession of his department) was found exactly as indicated at Fort Pierre on a hill near the Missouri and the Bad river, as recorded in Chevalier de La Verendrye's journal, which is an official document on file in the government office in Paris, France, where it has been much

consulted by historical writers of Canada and the United States.

Through the assistance of Mr. Robinson and Mr. W. O'Reilly, of Pierre, excellent photographs were obtained showing both sides of the plate. These photographs are covered in an application for copyright, but Mr. O'Reilly, the applicant, has very kindly and courteously consented that the writer make use of them for publication. This present publication is, therefore, the first which has been made of this extremely important long-buried historical record. There are a number of points now in dispute between historians regarding the route followed by La Verendrye's sons on this exploration, which will be definitely settled by the appearance, after 170 years, of this metal plate, and consequently, this publication will be no doubt eagerly welcomed by all writers and students of the history of Western Canada and the North Western States.

Chevalier de la Verendrye, by depositing this metal plate in the names of King Louis the Fifteenth of France and of the Marquis de Beauharnois, governor of Canada, took possession for France of the country discovered by him, and the plate, therefore, in a manner, constitutes the original patent or deed, by right of discovery, of the country west of the Upper Missouri river.

In 1803 France ceded to the United States all of her then remaining western American possessions. This plate is a veritable and tangible proof of the very foundation of France's claim



to that part of the territory so ceded to the United States. This method of taking possession of a new territory was common to all the early European explorers, who either deposited metal plates in the soil or placed them upon posts firmly planted in the ground. A case of this kind is specifically described in the recorded narrative of Captain Luke Foxe, who voyaged into

Hudson's Bay in the year 1631. On his arrival at what is now Port Nelson he found lying upon the ground a cross which had been erected by Captain Button, who had first discovered that territory in 1613. Foxe writes in his journal:

"I caused a Crosse which was found to be newly raised, and this inscription of lead nailed thereon:

"I suppose this Crosse was first erected by Sir Thomas Button, 1613. It was again raised by Luke Foxe, captain of the Charles in the right and possession of my dread Sovereigne Charles the First, King of Great Brittain, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, the 15th August, 1631."

"This land is called New Wales."

## What Led to the Exploration Which Determined the Depositing of the Metal Plate

Pierre Gauthier de Varenne de la Verendrye, the father of the Missouri explorers, was born at Three Rivers, Quebec, in the year 1686. He served in the French army in Europe and was nearly killed at the Battle of Malpaquet, where he was shot through the body and received several saber wounds, and was left for dead on the field. Some time after his return to Canada he was placed in charge of a post at Nipigon, Lake Superior, where in 1728 he heard of the country west of that great lake through accounts given by Indians. In 1730 he arranged with the Marquis de Beauharnois, the French Governor of Canada, a plan for the conducting of an exploration of the west, which combined with the work of exploring the establishing of forts, or trading posts, in order to enable him to defray the cost of his expeditions by profits from the fur trade. He also arranged with merchants to advance him supplies of goods suitable for the Indian trade.

To give some idea of the utter lack of any definite information regarding the country that Verendrye had decided to penetrate, it will be interesting to quote from a document now in the Dominion archives at Ottawa, being a communication from the Marquis de Beauharnois to the

French Colonial Minister, in Paris, concerning Verendrye's venture: "He must also have very accurate maps of New Mexico and California, so that he may not go and throw himself into the Gulf of Mexico, whereinto the Red river, of which he speaks, has all the appearances of disemboing."

La Verendrye during the following few years under most discouraging conditions and after great hardships, succeeded in establishing a number of fortified trading posts west of Lake Superior in hitherto unexplored territory. These included Fort Pierre (Fort Frances), Fort St. Charles (west side Lake of the Woods), Fort Maurepas, mouth of the Winnipeg river), Fort Rouge (a short-lived post within the limits of the present city of Winnipeg), Fort la Reine (Portage la Prairie) and some others to the north on Lake Manitoba and the Saskatchewan river.

It was in the year 1738 that he established Fort la Reine, and immediately after its construction accompanied by his two sons and some of his men he explored the country in a southwest direction, reaching as far as the Mandan villages on the Missouri river, in the present state of North Dakota. This exploration was made in pursuance of his great expectation of finding

a route to the western sea (Pacific Ocean), which was the supreme goal of the early French explorers west of Lake Superior. However, he could not gain from these Indians any definite information as to a possible route, and, after personally suffering very great hardships, he managed in the following February to return to Fort la Reine, where he found nearly the whole of the inhabitants, numbering some 42, almost starved to death. For some years La Verendrye and his two sons were occupied in extending their explorations to the north and northwest, and in endeavoring by visits of the father to Quebec to defeat the machinations of his enemies who in the case of his merchant creditors insisted that he was utilizing his fur trading operations solely as an adjunct to his explorations; while, on the other hand, envious enemies were accusing him to the French Court of neglecting his duty as an explorer in the interests of his trade in furs, which latter they claimed was greatly enriching him, though, as a matter of fact, he was rapidly becoming impoverished.

At last, in the spring of 1742, the two sons, with only two men, again adventured from Fort la Reine in a determined attempt to explore the Missouri river to its source and find a route to the western sea.



## An Account of the Exploration by La Verendrye's Sons

Historians' descriptions of the explorations of the Missouri River country by the two sons of La Verendrye are practically all based on the journal kept by the young men during their travels, which document yet remains intact in the archives of the French government in Paris. The account of the travels of the sons here given, follows in the main closely along the lines of a special article on the subject, by the historian, Francis Parkman, and entitled "The Discovery of the Rocky Mountains," which was written some four years before the issue of his two-volume book, "Half a Century of Conflict," a chapter of which conveys much the same information, but under a different heading:

La Verendrye's eldest surviving son, Pierre (his firstborn, Jean Baptiste, having been killed together with a priest and some twenty men on an Island in the Lake of the Woods in the year 1736), with a younger brother, known afterwards as the Chevalier de la Verendrye, took up the adventure, and, with two Canadian followers, set out for the Mandans on April 29, 1742. Following the River Assiniboine to the mouth of Mouse (Souris) river, they ascended that stream, crossed to the Missouri, and reached the principal Mandan village, after a journey of about three weeks from Fort la Reine. Here they found themselves the guests of one of the most interesting tribes on the continent. Nearly three-quarters of a century ago, the Mandans were almost exterminated by the smallpox, but the pencil of the excellent artist (Charles Bodiner) who accompanied Prince Maximilian of Wied to their village in 1832, and the faithful brush of the painter, Catlin, who visited them a few years later, have preserved them to posterity essentially unchanged since the journey of the brothers La Verendrye.

What the young travellers saw was a cluster of lodges, each forty or fifty feet wide, shaped like a flattened dome, strongly framed of trunks of trees and sapling poles, and covered with a thick matting of willow branches, over which was laid a bed of earth and clay, two or three feet deep. These capacious dwellings were grouped compactly round a central area, which served for games, dances, and the strange religious ceremonies practiced by the tribe. The sacred "medicine" lodge was distinguished from the rest by three or four tall poles planted before it, each with an effigy at the top, looking much like a scarecrow, and intended as a sacrifice to the spirits. The village was protected by a rude palisade and ditch, for the Mandans were surrounded by enemies.

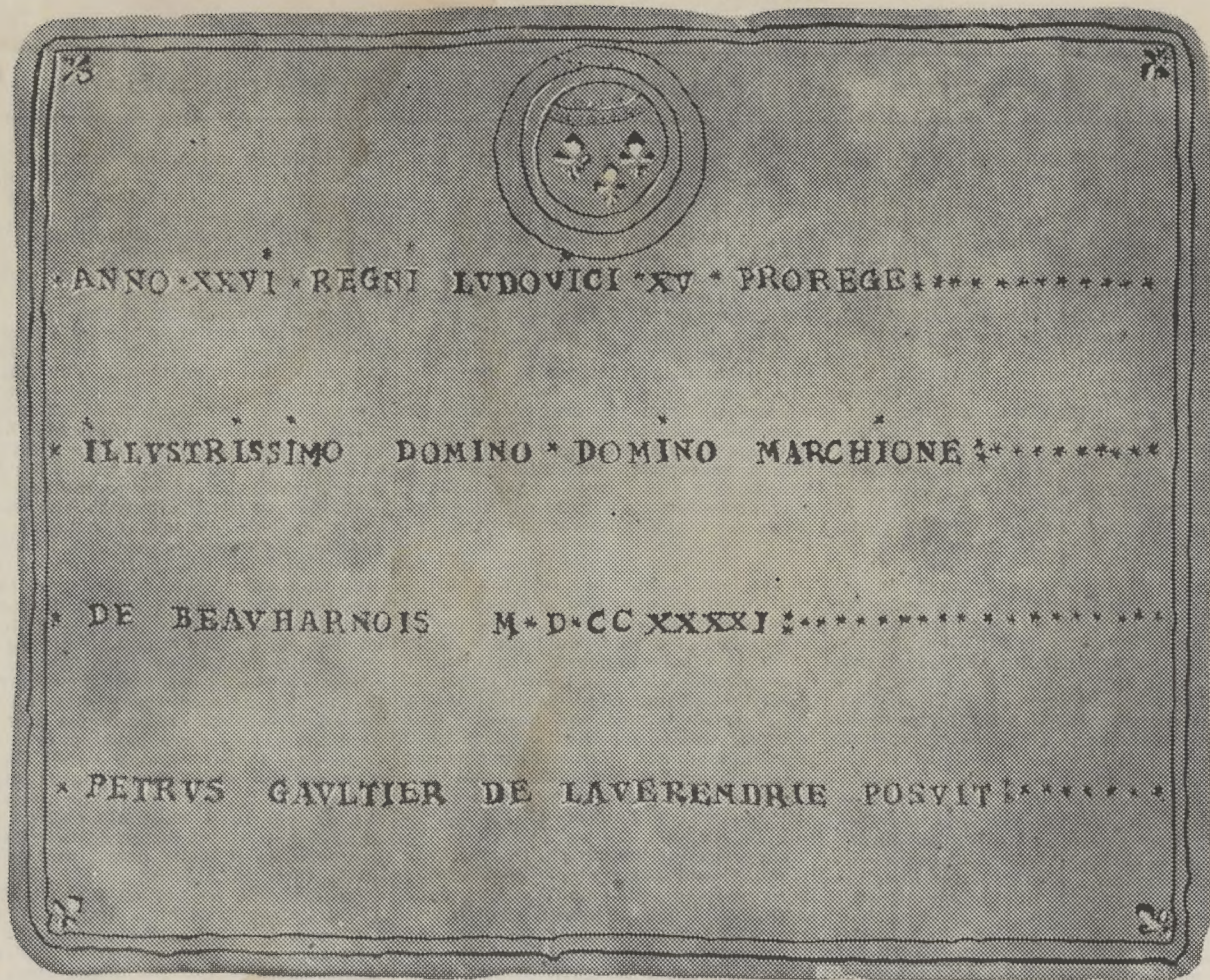
The Mandans did not know the way to the Pacific, but they told the brothers that they expected a speedy visit from a certain tribe or band, called Horse Indians, who could guide them thither. It is impossible to identify these people with any known tribe; all the tribes of that country might at this time have claimed the name. The brothers waited for them in vain until past midsummer. The season was too far advanced for longer delay and they hired two Mandans to guide them to the customary haunts of the Horse Indians.

They set out horseback, their scanty baggage and their stock of presents being carried, no doubt, by pack animals. Their general course was west-southwest. The Black hills lay at a distance on their left, and the Upper Missouri on their right. The country they traversed was a rolling prairie, well covered for the most part with grass and watered with small alkaline streams, creeping towards the Missouri, with an opaque, whitish current, over beds of sandy clay. There

was little or no wood except along these watercourses. "I noticed," said the Chevalier La Verendrye, "earths of different colors—blue, green, red, or black, white as chalk or yellowish like ochre." This was probably in the "bad lands" of the Little Missouri, where these party-colored earths form a conspicuous feature in the bare and barren bluffs, cut into fantastic shapes by storms and floods. For twenty days they saw no human being. The plains, says their journal, were alive with game. Deer sprang from the rank, reedy grass of the river bottoms; buffalo tramped by in ponderous columns, or dotted the pale swells of the distant prairie with their grazing multitudes; antelope approached, with the curiosity of their species, to gaze at the passing horsemen, then fled like the wind; and as the party neared the hilly uplands of the Yellowstone, they saw herds of elk and flocks of mountain sheep. Wolves, white and gray, howled about their camp all night; and in the dusk of evening, the coyote seated on the grass, with nose turned to the sky, saluted them with a confusion of yelpings, as if half a score of petulant voices were pouring together from the throat of one small beast. The ground was often honeycombed for a mile or more with the holes of the curious little marmot called the prairie-dog, which uttered its squealing bark as it came near, and then dived into its burrow.

On the 11th of August they reached a hill, or group of hills, apparently not far west of the Little Missouri. It was here that they hoped to find the Horse Indians, but the place was a solitude. They built a hut, made fires that the smoke might attract any Indians roaming near, and reconnoitred the country every day from the top of the hills. At length, on the 14th of September, they saw a spire of smoke



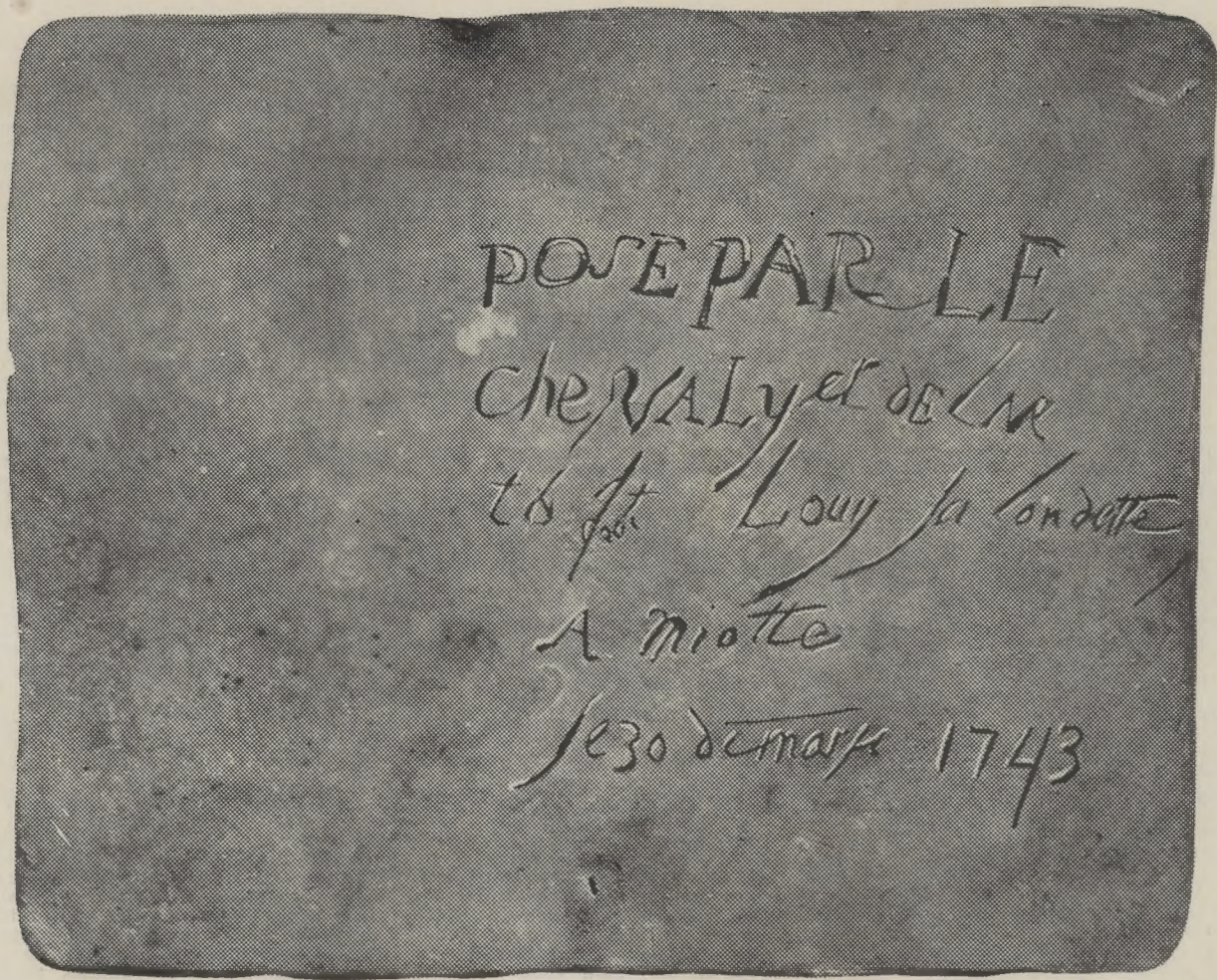


#### OBVERSE OF LEAD TABLET

Photograph by W. O'Reilly, Pierre, S.D.

The tablet is about eight inches in width. The Latin inscription on the obverse, shown above, is as follows: "Anno XXVI. Regni Ludovici XV. Pro Rege Illustrissimo Domino, Domino Marchione de Beauharnois MDCCXXXI Petrus Gauthier de Laverendrie Posuit." That is: "In the twenty-sixth year of the reign of Louis XV, in the name of the King, our thrice illustrious Sovereign, and for Monsieur the Marquis de Beauharnois, Peter Walter de Laverendrye placed (this tablet) 1741." The fleurs-de-lys of the Royal Arms of France are seen at the top of the tablet and at each corner.





REVERSE OF LEAD TABLET

Photograph by W. O'Reilly, Pierre, S.D.

The back of the tablet is much more corroded than the front. The inscription, cut with a knife, is as follows: "Pose par le Chevalyer de LaVr te St. Louy la Londette A. Miotte le 30 Mars 1743." The "te" means "temoins," witnesses. The two "engaged men" accompanying de la Verandrye were Louis de la Londette and A. Miotte. The inscription, translated, is as follows: "Deposited by the Chevalier de la Verandrye, Witnesses, St. Louis de la Londette, A Miotte, March 30, 1743." The difference between the date on the obverse and the date on the reverse is due, of course, to the fact that the former date was stamped on the tablet before the departure of the expedition from Quebec, the latter date being that of the actual burying of the tablet, as explained in the article. It is somewhat strange that the signature of the Chevalier's brother, who was with him on the expedition, does not appear on the tablet.



on the distant prairie. One of their Mandan guides had left them, and gone back to his village. The other with one of the Frenchmen went towards the smoke, and found a camp of Indians, whom the journal calls Les Beaux Hommes, and who were probably Crows, a tribe remarkable for stature and symmetry, who long claimed that region as their own. They treated the visitors well, and sent for the other Frenchmen to come to their lodges, where they were received with great rejoicing. The remaining Mandan, however, became frightened, for the Crows were enemies of his tribe; and he soon followed his companion on his solitary march homeward.

The brothers remained twenty-one days in the Crow camp, much perplexed for want of an interpreter. The tribes of the plains have in common a system of signs by which they communicate with each other, and it is likely that the brothers had learned it from the Sioux or Assiniboines with whom they had been in familiar intercourse. By this or some other means they made their hosts understand that they wished to find the Horse Indians; and the Crows, being soothed by presents, offered some of their young men as guides. They set out on the 9th of October, following a southwestern course. In two days they met a band of Indians, called by them the Little Foxes, and on the 15th and 17th two villages of another unrecognizable horde, named Ploia. From La Verendrye's time to our own this same "village" has always been given to the encampments of the wandering people of the plains. All these nomadic communities joined them, and they moved together southward till they reached at last the lodges of the long-sought Horse Indians. They found them in the extremity of distress and terror. Their camp resounded with howls and wallings, and not without cause; for the Snakes, or Shoshones, a formidable people living farther westward, had lately destroyed seventeen villages, killing the warriors

and old women, and carrying off the young women and children as slaves.

None of the Horse Indians had ever seen the Pacific, but they knew a people called Gens de l'Arc, or Bow Indians, who, they said, had traded in that quarter. To the Bow Indians, therefore, the brothers resolved to go, and by dint of gifts and promises they persuaded their hosts to show them the way. After marching southwestward for several days, they saw the distant prairie covered with the pointed buffalo-skin lodges of a great Indian camp. It was that of the Bow Indians, who appear to have been one of the bands of the western Sioux, the predominant race in this region. Not one in five hundred of them could ever have seen a white man, and we may imagine their amazement at the arrival of the strangers, who, followed by staring crowds, were conducted to the lodge of the chief.

"Thus far," says La Verendrye, "we had been well received in all the villages we had passed, but this was nothing compared with the courteous manners of the great chief of the Bow Indians, who, unlike the others, was not self-interested in the least, and who took excellent care of everything belonging to us."

The first inquiry of the travelers was for the Pacific, but neither the chief nor his tribesmen knew anything of it, except what they had heard from Snake prisoners taken in war. The Frenchmen were surprised at the extent of the camp, which consisted of many separate bands. The chief explained that they had been summoned from far and near for a grand war party against that common foe of all, the Snakes. In fact the camp resounded with war songs and war dances. "Come with us," said their host, "we are going towards the mountains, here you can see the great water that you are looking for."

"We continued our march," says La Verendrye, "sometimes south-southwest, and now and then northwest; our numbers constantly increasing by villages of different tribes which join-

ed us." The variations of their course were probably due to the difficulties of the country, which grew more rugged as they advanced, with broken hills, traces of dingy green sage bushes, and bright, swift streams, edged with cottonwood and willow, hurrying northward to join the Yellowstone.

At length, on Jan. 1, 1743, they saw the Rocky mountains, probably the Bighorn range, a hundred and twenty miles east of the Yellowstone park. A council of all the allied bands was now called, and the Frenchmen were asked to take part in it. The questions discussed were how to dispose of the women and children, and how to attack the enemy. Having settled their plans, the chiefs begged their white friends not to abandon them; and the younger of the two, the Chevalier, consented to join the warriors, and aid them with advice, though not with arms.

The tribes of the western plains rarely go on war-parties in winter, and this great expedition must have been the result of unusual exasperation. The object was to surprise the Snakes in the security of their winter camp, and strike a deadly blow, which would have been impossible in summer. On Jan. 8 the whole body stopped to encamp, choosing, no doubt, after their invariable winter custom, a place sheltered from wind, and supplied with water and fuel. Here the squaws and children were to remain, while most of the warriors advanced against the enemy. By pegging the lower edge of the lodge-skin to the ground and piling a ridge of stones and earth upon it to keep out the air, fastening with wooden skewers the flap of hide that covered the entrance, and keeping a constant fire, they could pass a winter endurable to Indians, though smoke, filth, vermin, bad air, the crowd, and the total absence of privacy would make it a purgatory to any civilized white man.

The Chevalier left his brother to watch over the baggage of the party, which was stored in the lodge of the great chief, while he, himself, with his



two Canadians, joined the advancing warriors. They were on horseback, marching with a certain order, and sending watchmen to reconnoitre the country from the tops of the hills. Their movements were so slow that it was twelve days before they reached the mountains, which, says La Verendrye, "are for the most part well wooded, and seem very high." He longed to climb their great snow-encumbered peaks, fancying that he might then see the Pacific, and never dreaming that more than eight hundred miles of mountains and forests still lay between him and his goal.

Through the whole of the past century the favorite haunts of the southern division of the Snakes were in the valleys of Wind and Green rivers. It is likely that they were so in 1743, in which case the war-party would not only have reached the Bighorn mountains, but have pushed farther on with-in full sight of the Great Wind river range. Be this as it may, their scouts reached the chief winter camp of the Snakes, and found it abandoned, with lodges still standing, and many household possessions left behind. The enemy had discovered their approach and fled. Instead of encouraging the allies, this news filled them with terror, for they feared that the Snake warriors might make a circuit to the rear, and fall upon the camp where they had left their women and children. The great chief spent all his eloquence in vain. Nobody would listen to him, and with characteristic fickleness they gave over the enterprise, and retreated in a panic.

"Our advance was made in good order, but not so our retreat," says the Chevalier's journal. "Everybody fled his own way. Our horses, though good, were very tired, and got little to eat." He was one day riding with his friend, the great chief, when, looking behind them, he missed his two French attendants. Hastening back in alarm, he found them far in the rear quietly feeding their horses under the shelter of a clump of trees. He had scarcely

joined them when he saw a party of fifteen hostile Indians stealthily creeping forward, covered by their bull-hide shields. He and his men let them approach, and then gave them a few shots, on which they immediately ran off, firearms being to them an astounding novelty.

The three Frenchmen now tried to rejoin the great chief and his band, but the task was not easy. The prairie, bare of snow and hard as flint, showed no trace of foot or hoof, and it was by rare good fortune that they succeeded, on the second day, not in overtaking the chief, but in reaching the camp where the women and children had been left. They found them all in safety; the Snakes had not attacked them, and the panic of the warriors was causeless. It was Feb. 9. They were scarcely housed when a blizzard set in, and on the night of the 10th the plains were buried in snow. The great chief had not appeared. With such of his warriors as he could persuade to follow him, he made a wide circuit to find the trail of the lost Frenchmen, but, to his great distress, had completely failed.

It was not till five days after the arrival of the Chevalier and his men that the chief reached the camp, "more dead than alive," in the words of the journal. All his hardships were forgotten when he found his white friends safe, for he had given them up for lost. "His sorrow turned to joy, and he could not give us attention and caresses enough." The camp broke up and the allied bands dispersed. The great chief and his followers moved slowly through the snowdrifts toward the east-southeast accompanied by the Frenchmen. Thus they kept on till the 1st of March, when the two brothers, learning that they were approaching the winter village of a people called Gens de la Petite Cerise, or Choke Cherry Indians, sent one of their men with a guide, to visit them. The man returned in ten days, bringing a message from the Choke Cherry Indians inviting the Frenchmen to their lodges.

The great chief of the Bowmen, who seems to have regarded his young friends with mingled affection, respect and wonder, was grieved at the thought of losing them but took comfort when they promised to visit him again, provided that he would make his abode near a certain river which they pointed out. To this he readily agreed and then with mutual regret they parted. The Frenchmen repaired to the village of the Choke Cherry Indians, who, like the Bowmen, were probably a band of Sioux. Hard by their lodges which stood near the Missouri, the brothers buried a plate of lead graven with the royal arms, and raised a pile of stones in honor of the Governor of Canada.

They remained at this place till April, 1743, then, mounting their horses again, followed the Missouri upward to the village of the Mandans, which they reached on the 18th of May. After spending a week here, they joined a party of Assiniboines, journeyed with them towards Fort La Reine, and reached it on the 2nd of July, to the great relief of their father, who was waiting in suspense, having heard nothing of them for more than a year.

Parkman writes further: "Sixty-two years later when the vast western regions then called Louisiana had just been ceded to the United States, Captains Lewis and Clark left the Mandan villages with thirty-two men, traced the Missouri to the mountains, penetrated the wastes beyond, and made their way to the Pacific. The first stages of that remarkable exploration were anticipated by the brothers La Verendrye. They did not find the Pacific, but they discovered the Rocky Mountains, or at least that part of them to which the name properly belongs; for the southern continuation of the great range had long been known to the Spaniards. Their bold adventure was achieved, not at the charge of a government, but at their own cost and that of their father; not with a band of well equipped men, but with only two followers."











